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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KINSHASA 000319

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KPKO RW CG

SUBJECT: CHILD SOLDIER RECRUITMENT A DIMINISHING PROBLEM IN
DRC

REF: A. KINSHASA 297

1B. KINSHASA 98

1C. KINSHASA 65

Classified By: PolOff CBrown, reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (C) Summary: A senior UN official proclaimed the DRC's child soldier problem is "essentially over," but charged that dissident general Laurent Nkunda is recruiting child soldiers from refugee camps in Rwanda. Humanitarian officials report more than 100 child soldiers have been separated from Nkunda's ranks, including some reportedly recruited in the DRC and Rwanda in the past several months. Congolese demobilization authorities agree the number of child soldiers in the DRC is now greatly reduced. Those remaining are mostly found in local militia groups. End summary.

A POSITIVE ASSESSMENT OF SITUATION

12. (U) Radhika Coomaraswamy, UN Undersecretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, gave a positive assessment of the DRC's child soldier situation during a March 4-9 visit to the country (ref A). She said recruitment is "essentially over," but added that much work remains to reintegrate them into society. Coomaraswamy added that she was pleased that Congolese officials are treating the subject as a high priority.

13. (SBU) Daniel Kawata, the coordinator of the Congolese national disarmament agency CONADER, told us March 13 that the problem of child soldiers and their recruitment has diminished significantly in the past several years. He said that since CONADER began its activities in 2003, more than 29,000 children have been identified and removed from various armed groups, although many still need to be reunited with their families.

14. (SBU) Kawata estimated that approximately 3,000 child soldiers still remain in the DRC, mostly with militias in Ituri District and with Mayi-Mayi groups in the Kivu provinces and northern Katanga. MONUC's Child Protection division reported in early March that 32 children, including 28 boys and four girls, were removed from the Balenie Mayi-Mayi group in North Kivu after being identified at a military integration center. Nearly four dozen children were separated from Peter Karim's Front for National Integration (FNI) militia after his forces surrendered to the Congolese military in February and March. Kawata added that a handful of children are also suspected of serving in the protection details of transitional vice presidents Jean-Pierre Bemba and Azarias Ruberwa.

ACCUSATIONS OF CONTINUED RECRUITMENT

¶5. (C) Despite her generally positive assessment, Coomaraswamy charged that child soldier recruitment continues in the DRC and elsewhere in the region. In a March 1 letter to Rwandan President Paul Kagame, she accused agents of dissident General Laurent Nkunda of recruiting children in the Kibuye refugee camp in Rwanda (ref A). Post has obtained a copy of the letter, which states that child protection officials in the DRC interviewed two boys in mid-February who had been separated from pro-Nkunda troops in North Kivu. They said they had been recruited from the camp with nine other children and 17 adults in mid-January 2007. The boys also claimed the NGO "Association of Young Congolese Refugees," allegedly linked to Nkunda, has actively recruited children in Kibuye since July 2006.

¶6. (C) MONUC's Child Protection division in Goma, North Kivu, reported March 12 that it had interviewed two other boys, ages 16 and 17, who claimed they had been recruited by Nkunda agents in the Byumba refugee camp in Rwanda, also in mid-January. They said they were recruited with two other children and forced to serve as cooks in the "mixed" Bravo Brigade of the Congolese national army (FARDC). (Note: The so-called "mixed" brigades in North Kivu combine pro-Nkunda troops and pro-government Congolese military forces in single units. They were created as part of ceasefire deal between Nkunda and the GDRC in December 2006, refs B and C. End note.) MONUC Child Protection reported the boys were issued military uniforms and identification cards for Bravo during

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its registration phase in late January. They later deserted the Bravo camp for Goma, where they were detained by military authorities.

¶7. (C) Humanitarian officials report more than 200 other children have been identified in the past several months within the former 81st and 83rd FARDC brigades, which were generally pro-Nkunda, and now form part of the "mixed" brigades. OCHA-North Kivu Director Patrick Lavand'homme told PolOff in early February in Goma that his office had received reports of forcible recruitment of children from schools in Masisi territory in western North Kivu, Nkunda's base of operations. He added that OCHA and UNICEF officials had identified 162 children from the 81st and 83rd between December and February during the registration process for the "mixed" brigades. Lavand'homme said those children interviewed said they were recruited beginning in late November. OCHA spokesman Andrew Zadel said in a mid-February press report that 257 children had been found among the three "mixed" brigades in North Kivu.

¶8. (C) Lavand'homme said March 15 many more children remain under the control of pro-Nkunda forces in some of the "mixed" brigades as of early March. He alleged that Colonel Makenga Fulsani, formerly a commander with the 83rd and currently the commander of the "mixed" Bravo Brigade deployed in Rutshuru territory, has refused to release child soldiers in his ranks because he does not believe they qualify as "children."

COMMENT: AN ONGOING PROBLEM, BUT GREATLY IMPROVED

¶9. (C) Child soldiers still exist in the DRC, almost exclusively in groups not under the government's control, but their numbers are greatly reduced from years past. The continued demobilization of the DRC's various armed groups will help reduce their number even further. Renegade General Laurent Nkunda and his followers have long been implicated in such affairs and apparently continues to recruit, as evidenced by the new reports. End comment.

